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The Ring-necked Duck in Northern California

Until comparatively recent years, ornithological authorities have classed Ring-necked ducks (*Nyroca collaris*) as rather rare winter visitants to Northern California. Thus, Grinnell in his 1915 "Distributional List of the Birds of California" (Pac. Coast Avif. 11, p. 36) wrote: "Now rather uncommon as a winter visitant; formerly fairly common; some fourteen records." Three years later, the same author and Bryant and Storer ("Game Birds of California," Univ. of Calif. Press, Berkeley, 1918, p. 165) considered it a rather rare winter visitant and they reported but 15 definite records of occurrence for the State. Grinnell and Wythe, in "Directory to the Bird-life of the San Francisco Bay Region" (Pac. Coast Avif. 18, 1927, p. 53) apparently realized that the species was a more numerous visitor than the previous citations indicated, for they described its status as "rather uncommon, but fairly regular, winter visitant."

That even the latter statement is a gross underestimate of the species' true status, was recognized by the writer nearly twenty years ago. In the early 1920's, when he frequently gunned for ducks in the Sacramento Valley, numbers of these birds were encountered when the proper environment was visited. For instance, several were seen and one was shot on Butte Creek, 9 miles west of Gridley, November 2, 1919. Out of 50 ducks killed by the writer and a friend on a deep, tule-margined pond bordering Butte Creek in extreme western Sutter County on November 11, 1922, no less than 22 were Ring-necked ducks. As early as October 14, 1928, this shooting partner killed several of these ducks on the same pond. Numbers of Ring-necked ducks have since been observed on many winter visits to suitable environment of the Sacramento Valley, as: Butte Creek, west of Pennington, Sutter County, 3 collected, December 28, 1930; one collected 3 miles north of Colusa, February 26, 1933.

Farther south, at a period of flood of the Sacramento River, one was collected of many seen on Cache Slough, 10 miles north of Rio Vista, Solano County, January 21, 1921. Another was collected on Honker Bay, Solano County, nine days later. There is an adult male in the California Museum of Vertebrate Zoology which was collected by the writer 2 miles south of Suisun, Solano County, October 21, 1923. An analysis of the shooting record of a gun club in this region indicated that here Ring-necked ducks are shot about as frequently as are Lesser Scaup ducks (*Nyroca affinis*). (see Moffitt, *Condor*, vol. 40, 1938, p. 82). The writer collected a Ring-neck 6 miles east of Los Banos, Merced County, October 30, 1927.

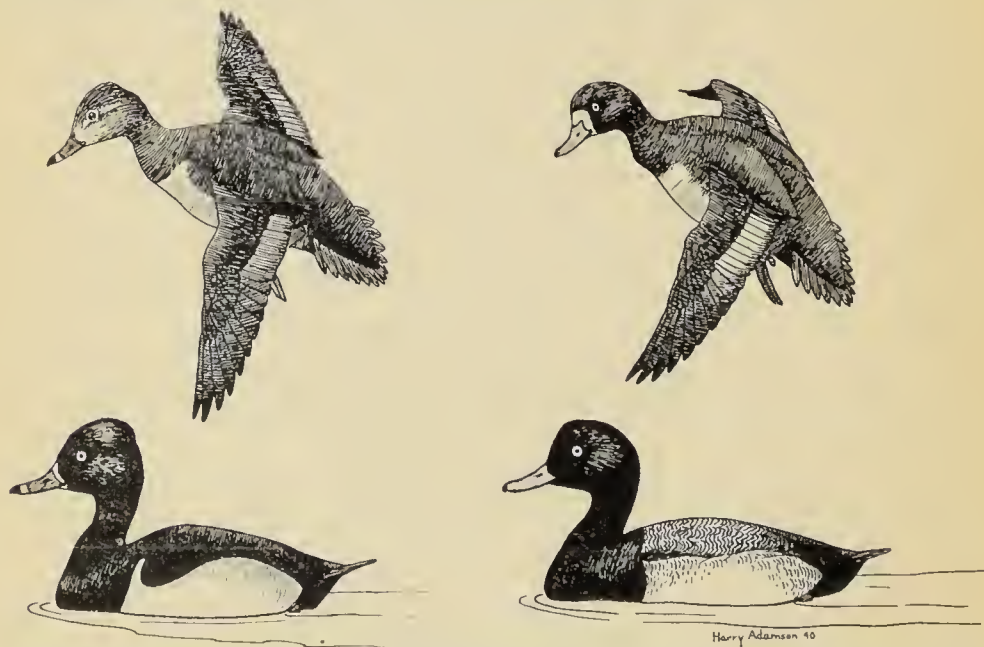
In addition to the above records supported by specimens, many sight records could be mentioned, but only outstanding ones will be cited. The Fine Arts Lagoon of the 1915 Exposition at the eastern edge of the Presidio of San Francisco is a well-known wintering place for Ring-necked ducks. According to local Audubon Association observers' Christmas censuses, tabulations of which I am greatly indebted to Mrs. Albert B. Stephens for furnishing, only 3 Ring-necked ducks were observed here in the 1929 census. The number has since increased steadily, almost year by year, until the largest census, 91 birds, was obtained

here in 1939. My personal acquaintance with this flock commenced on February 18, 1934, with about 40 birds noted. The flock is apparently resident throughout the winter and 15 individuals were present on my first autumnal visit, October 7, 1939. On the 28th of that month, 43 birds were observed. Individuals remain well into April and 25 were counted on April 1, 1940. These ducks are frequent visitors, but not permanent winter residents, on Stow Lake, Golden Gate Park, as attested by personal observation and Audubon censuses, but they are usually greatly outnumbered there by Lesser Scaup ducks.

Searsville Lake, south of Woodside, San Mateo County, supports a thriving winter colony of Ring-necks. About 60 birds were observed here on January 15, 1940.

Reservoirs and other deep, fresh water lakes along the Sierra Nevada foothills are wintering places for Ring-necked ducks. A pond barely 100 yards across, formed by damming Paynes Creek, at 1000 feet elevation, 20 miles east of Red Bluff, Tehama County, harbors from 10 to 40 Ring-necks from October to March. Similar numbers are to be found on reservoirs at 1600 feet elevation, 4 miles northeast of Auburn, Placer County, where observed March 15 and October 15, 1939, and January 26, February 26, and March 19, 1940.

The above records indicate that Ring-necked ducks are fairly common, regular winter visitants to a large part of Northern California. Furthermore, they show that the species prefers deep, fresh-water ponds.



RING-NECKED (LEFT) AND LESSER SCAUP DUCKS, FEMALES ABOVE.

Why were so few Ring-necked ducks recorded from Northern California in ornithological literature prior to 1927? Has the species since become more numerous or was it previously overlooked? Probably both of the latter questions may properly be answered affirmatively.

The Audubon Association of the Pacific's Christmas Bird Census results are helpful in this connection, but in interpreting the results, it should be borne in mind that observers in recent years are probably better able to distinguish Ring-necked from Lesser Scaup ducks than they were in the late 1920's. Annual totals for the two species since 1928, kindly completed by Mrs. Stephens, are provided below and the large numbers of Scaup reported for 1928-1930 may include a number of mis-identified Ring-necks. The recent "flood" of excellent bird field guides and a general awakening of interest on the part of bird watchers

in waterfowl in the past decade have done much to make observers better acquainted with the many species of ducks. Mistaken identities cannot be so numerous, especially in recent years, as to nullify the population increases indicated for Ring-necks. It appears that the species is actually on the increase in California.

RESULTS OF CHRISTMAS BIRD CENSUSES FOR SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933
Ring-necked Duck	10	21	33	28	45	83
Lesser Scaup Duck.....	126	127	91	11	70	50
	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
Ring-necked Duck	42	64	101	86	180	177
Lesser Scaup Duck.....	41	44	35	27	84	56

There is really no excuse for anyone to confuse a Ring-necked duck with a Lesser Scaup under satisfactory conditions for observation. The accompanying sketches are designed to show the principal field characters. The birds are of approximately the same size. The low crested head, double white-banded bill, black back and white crescent-shaped extension of the white of the body, ahead of the wing in the male Ring-neck should always serve to distinguish it on the water from the blue-billed, "canvas"-backed Lesser Scaup. When on the wing, the gray speculum of both sexes of the Ring-neck is a positive, but rather difficult to observe character. The specula of all the Scaup ducks are white. On the water, female Ring-necks can best be distinguished from female Scaup in winter plumage by their darker backs and by the absence of a sharply defined white face. The face of a female Scaup in winter plumage is pure white immediately behind the bill. (In summer plumage, this area becomes brown by moult in the Scaup.) In the female Ring-neck there are darker feathers bordering the top of the bill, with a grayish or whitish, extremely variable, pale area extending below the eye, back at least to the ear. The *brown* eye of the female Ring-neck is surrounded by pale feathers which extend somewhat ahead of and behind the eye, whereas the *yellow* eye of the female Lesser Scaup is surrounded by the uniform dark brown plumage of the entire head. The eyes of adult males of both species are bright yellow. The female Ring-neck's bill is leaden, save for a bluish sub-terminal cross band that is much less noticeable than the china white bill bands of her male. The bill of the female Scaup is bluish. The female Ring-neck is extremely similar to a female Redhead Duck (*Nyroca americana*) in plumage and configuration, save that the former is smaller and has a proportionally shorter head and bill. To positively identify females of the latter species in the field is difficult, but under most circumstances the trained observer should have little difficulty in separating either from the Scaup ducks.

James Moffitt, California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, California,
April 1, 1940.



Birds Along the Sears Point Road in Solano County

We make trips at not infrequent intervals over the Sears Point Road in western Solano County, but it is not upon all occasions that we have the opportunity of exploring this area for any length of time. On January 27, 1940, however, we spent a period of two hours, from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., observing an estimated 10,000 or more birds in these marshes. The day was clear and warm and the high tide on the Bay had caused many of the shore birds to retreat to this marsh, some feeding and some resting. The greater number of birds were, as usual, on the western portion of the marsh through which the road passes. We estimated the number of birds seen and species as follows: Eared Grebe 2, Pied-billed Grebe 3, California Heron 12, American Egret 40, Brewster Egret 1, Shoveller Duck 800, Canvasback 1000, Bufflehead 2, Ruddy Duck 400, White-tailed Kite 1, Marsh Hawk 6, Coot 100, Killdeer 4, Black-bellied Plover 50, Long-billed Curlew 300, Willett 400, Greater Yellowlegs 6, Least Sandpiper 200, Red-backed Sandpiper 2000, Long-billed Dowitcher 50, Western Sandpiper 2000, Marbled

Godwit 1500, Avocet 1200, Glaucous-winged Gull 20, Western Gull 40, California Gull 10, Bonaparte Gull 5, Suisun Marsh Wren 6, Pipit 200, Meadowlark 70, Willow Goldfinch 1, Savannah Sparrow 500, Nuttall Sparrow 6, Samuel Song Sparrow 125.

The White-tailed Kite was perched on a short post along the Napa Slough. A gun club keeper with whom we talked said there were two or three kites which he has seen about the club house on his grounds, but we found his information unreliable as he pointed out an adult male Marsh Hawk which was flying over his windmill as being a Kite. One other Kite had been seen by us on this date as we were leaving Benicia, it being perched in the top of a eucalyptus just outside of town.

Emerson A. Stoner and J. Duncan Graham, Benicia, California.



Audubon Notes

April Meeting: The regular meeting will be held on Thursday, the 11th, at 8 p.m., in the Ferry Building.

"Bird Shots by an Amateur Photographer" will be presented by Mr. Andrew Shirra Gibb of Berkeley.

Members may bring guests.

April Field Trip will be taken on Sunday, the 14th, to McCoy Ranch and Arroyo Mocho in Livermore Valley. A Greyhound chartered bus will leave at 7:30 a.m. from Fifth and Mission Streets Terminal (meet inside). East Bay members will meet the bus at Fourteenth and Grove Streets, Oakland (in front of the library), at 7:50 a.m. There are a few seats left; if you want to go, send one dollar deposit to Miss Frances J. Blake, 1505 Holly Street, Berkeley, immediately. Bring luncheon and wear rough shoes for long and short walks. Leader, Gordon Bolander.

Directors' Meeting: There will be a Directors' meeting in room 714, 245 Market Street, at 6:30 p.m., April 11th.

March Meeting: The 271st regular meeting was held on the 14th in the

Ferry Building, with fifty-one members and guests present. President B. K. Dunshee presided.

Mrs. Joseph Grinnell of Berkeley and Melville V. Wolff of San Francisco were elected to membership.

The following observations were reported:

Mrs. Chas. F. Austin: Larkspur, Pileolated Warbler, March 12th.

Mrs. G. L. Ensign: West end of San Rafael, Lutescent Warbler, March 7th.

Mrs. Otis H. Smith: San Anselmo, Allen Hummingbird, February 5th; Rufous Hummingbird, February 12th and many times since; San Rafael, Rufous Hummingbird, 21st; San Anselmo, Lutescent Warbler, 20th; Ross, four Violet-green Swallows, March 6th.

Harold Kirker: Strawberry Canyon, Lutescent Warbler, March 9th.

The speaker of the evening, Dr. Paul T. Wilson, Professor of Natural Sciences, Marin Junior College, gave a very interesting talk on the Wildlife in Sequoia National Park, and showed very beautiful Kodachrome slides, a number of which were of meadows with wild flowers in great profusion.

Audubon Association of the Pacific

Organized January 25, 1917

For the Study and the Protection of Birds

President.....Mr. B. K. Dunshee.....Room 714, 245 Market St., San Francisco

Corresponding Secretary.....Mr. Joseph J. Webb.....519 California St., San Francisco

Treasurer.....Mrs. A. B. Stephens.....1695 Filbert St., San Francisco

Monthly meeting second Thursday, 8 P. M., Ferry Building.

Address Bulletin correspondence to Mrs. A. B. Stephens, Editor, 1695 Filbert St., San Francisco.

Membership dues, payable January 1st, \$3.00 per year.

Student memberships, \$1.50 per year.

Life memberships, \$50.00.

Members are responsible for dues until written notice of resignation is received by Treasurer.